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The Brotherhood vs. Al-Qaeda: A Moment of Truth?

By Jean-Pierre Filiu

Al-Qaeda built its ideological doctrine largely in opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood's pervasive and once dominant approach to Islam's political revival. For many years, the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to ignore al-Qaeda's challenge and concentrated instead on beefing up its own organizational and ideological alternative to the ruling secular regimes in the Arab world and elsewhere. This pattern changed dramatically after September 11, 2001, when it became more difficult for the Brotherhood to disregard al-Qaeda and the two movements began competing more openly for leadership of the overall Islamist movement.

At the core of the dispute between al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood lies a clash between two different conceptions of jihad and its purposes under contemporary circumstances. Al-Qaeda projects a global agenda, where every Muslim land—"from Granada to Kashgar," as Ayman al-Zawahiri has put it—needs to be "liberated" from non-Islamic rule. Jihad is conceived of as an individual duty that all Muslims must fulfil by struggling in word and deed against any representative of the "Jews and Crusaders," as well as against "apostate" Muslim governments. The Muslim Brotherhood, by contrast, has for reasons both ideological and tactical tended in recent decades to embrace a more limited conception of jihad combined with missionary activity and organized political struggle. The Brotherhood, for instance, has officially renounced the use of revolutionary violence to overturn existing Muslim states. Moreover, while the movement has fervently supported armed struggle against non-Islamic

forces in places like Iraq, they have also sought to offer an alternative jihadism to al-Qaeda's sectarianism, and the Brotherhood's Iraqi branch has come in recent years to embrace the U.S.-backed political system of post-Saddam Iraq. Likewise, the Brotherhood-offshoot Hamas, which since 2006 has officially ruled over the Gaza strip, is the first Palestinian militia to consistently limit its activities to the territory of pre-1948 Palestine—meaning Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.

In recent times, these two Islamist movements came to blows yet again after Hamas seized control of the Gaza strip and, in the process of consolidating its power, subsequently repressed Gaza's al-Qaeda-inspired groups. Nowadays, al-Qaeda's ongoing conflict with Hamas has become one of the main liabilities to al-Qaeda's propaganda and its efforts to establish itself as the leader of the worldwide jihadist movement. The outcome of this now generation-old intra-Islamist dispute will have important consequences for the future direction of jihadism.

Bitter Harvests

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD'S NETWORKS WERE INITIALLY INDISPENSIBLE IN channelling funds and volunteers into the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad which laid the fertile ground from which al-Qaeda emerged. One of the key people behind the Brotherhood's activities in support of the jihad was Shaykh Kamal Sananiri, a prominent Saudi-based Egyptian Brotherhood militant who handled the political dimension of the Saudi Kingdom's support of the Afghan militant factions. Sananiri organized the formal rallying of the mujahidin groups around Abd al-Rasul Sayyaf, who became the patron of the Arab fighters. It was also Sananiri who convinced Abdallah Azzam, a lecturer at the University of Jeddah and former leader of the Jordanian Brotherhood, to move to Pakistan to support the Afghan jihad. When Sananiri disappeared from the scene in the aftermath of President Sadat's assassination (he was later arrested in October 1981 and died in detention), Azzam took over as the liaison between the Arab militants and the Afghan mujahidin.

Osama bin Laden first travelled to Pakistan as a Muslim Brotherhood envoy to the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami; he had been tasked with delivering material support to the Afghan mujahidin. Bin Laden joined Azzam in Peshawar, where in 1984 they together established the "Services Bureau," a worldwide network to foster volunteering and financing on behalf of the Afghan cause. Azzam had earlier clashed with the Jordanian Brotherhood's leadership over their reluctance to endorse military aid to the Afghan jihad. With the Services Bureau initiative, Azzam and bin Laden effectively emancipated themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Azzam and bin Laden's breakaway from the Muslim Brotherhood occurred during

the disastrous collapse of the Brotherhood's uprising against the Syrian regime—a traumatic event that fuelled a violent debate among the Brothers over whether an Islamic state could ever be achieved through revolutionary jihad. Ultimately, the revolutionary or "military" option was defeated in this dispute, and political struggle and participation in existing political orders, with the intention of transforming them from within, became the Brotherhood's main focus.

For Brotherhood militants unhappy with their movement's new political direction, the Afghan jihad, and Bin Laden and Azzam's Services Bureau in Peshawar, soon became a major destination. Among these individuals was Abu Musab al-Suri (Mustafa Settmariam Nasar's moniker), a young militant from the Syrian "Fighting Vanguard" group. In Peshawar these disillusioned Brotherhood activists met diehard Egyptian radicals who shared a deep hostility towards the Brotherhood's "treacherous" ways. Two of these Egyptian leaders, Said Imam al-Sharif (who is perhaps best known today by his *nom de guerre*, "Doctor Fadl") and Ayman al-Zawahiri, accused the Brotherhood of collaborating with "apostate" regimes.

This anti-Brotherhood background was crucial in the ideological formation of al-Qaeda when the movement was secretly founded in August 1988. Zawahiri collected his anti-Brotherhood materials in his landmark book *The Bitter Harvest*, which was published in Peshawar and circulated throughout the world through al-Qaeda's burgeoning networks. To this day, al-Qaeda condemns what it regards as the Muslim Brotherhood's chain of "betrayals" of Islam's cause—especially including their betrayal of the principle of God's sovereignty (*hakimiyya,* by forming political parties and embracing modern political life) and their "betrayal" of the Islamic obligation of jihad (by dropping the revolutionary option and embracing a more limited concept of jihad).

Hamas Emerges

HAMAS WAS ESTABLISHED IN DECEMBER 1987, WHEN THE PALESTINIAN BRANCH of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood seceded and formed an independent group. This development represented a departure from what had been for almost four decades the Brotherhood's policy and practice with respect to Israel. In 1949, the Jordanian branch of the Brotherhood had endorsed the Hashemite Kingdom's annexation of the West Bank and kept a unified apparatus on both sides of the Jordan River. This system was more or less preserved after the Israeli occupation in 1967, and the Brotherhood continued to support the Hashemite claim of sovereignty against the Palestinian nationalist camp.

By leaving the Jordanian realm, Hamas was effectively joining the Palestinian

nationalist camp. However, this new Islamist movement generally steered clear of the Fatah-dominated Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was deemed too secular by Hamas's standards. At the same time, Hamas's main priority—and, by extension, the top priority of those elements of the Brotherhood movement as a whole that came to support Hamas's breakaway from the Jordanian Brotherhood—was anti-Israel militancy. This embrace of jihad represented somewhat of a shift for the Brotherhood away from the social activism and underground ideological work that had been its focus ever since government-led crackdowns on the movement in the 1960s. And through Hamas's ascendancy, anti-Israel militancy became increasingly one of the chief ways in which the Brotherhood as a whole attempted to establish its Islamist credentials and win new recruits to its organization.

In August 1996, bin Laden pledged to liberate Saudi Arabia from "infidel occupation" and declared jihad against the United States. But at the time, he also felt the need to align the al-Qaeda movement with the Palestinian cause, and so he praised Shaykh Ahmad Yassin, Hamas's charismatic leader, for rejecting the peace agreements signed between Israel and the PLO. A wave of Hamas suicide attacks in Israel had triggered, in March 1996, the convening of a peace summit in Sharm al-Sheikh; al-Qaeda propaganda increasingly used the images of the Arab leaders embracing their US or Israeli counterparts as powerful illustrations of the collusion between the "apostate regimes" and the "Crusaders." Al-Qaeda was also inspired by the posthumous statements of Hamas "martyrs" and imitated this public relations tactic with its own suicide-bombers. But on the whole, Palestinian nationalism was too strong to fall for global jihad and al-Qaeda could only recruit a few militants of Palestinian origin, all of whom had been born and raised in the Gulf.

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, bin Laden went on invoking the Palestinian cause as a way of fostering his global outreach. But al-Qaeda's anti-Israeli attacks in Mombasa in November 2002, which left 15 dead including 3 Israeli tourists, were barely noticed among Palestinian fighters in West Bank and Gaza. After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi tried to persuade bin Laden to establish a power base in Iraq's guerrilla-controlled areas; from there, he proposed that al-Qaeda could move into Jordan and, eventually, wage war against Israel. But at that time, al-Qaeda was absorbed in its own terror campaign in Saudi Arabia, and it was not until late 2004 that al-Qaeda endorsed Zarqawi's strategy.

During his reign of terror in Iraq, one of Zarqawi's favorite targets was the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, known as the Islamic Party, which joined post-Saddam Iraq's US-backed and secured government and began participating in the country's political system. Zarqawi also managed to expand al-Qaeda's jihadist networks into his home country of Jordan, and in August 2005, a rocket was fired by al-Qaeda militants onto Israeli territory. Hamas was, at that time, busy trying to make

the most of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, and Palestinian militants were publicly angered by Zarqawi's provocations.

In January of 2006, when Hamas political candidates ran for Palestinian legislative elections, al-Qaeda's propaganda turned entirely against the Palestinian movement. During this period, Zawahiri's *Bitter Harvest* polemic against the Brotherhood was recycled against Hamas. When Hamas decided to field candidates, for instance, al-Qaeda accused it of behaving like other regional Brotherhood branches by betraying God's sovereignty and embracing the "infidel" system of democracy. Furthermore, al-Qaeda propagandists argued that Hamas's participation in Palestinian elections was tantamount to recognizing Israel, since the Palestinian electoral institutions had been a by-product of Israel-PLO agreements. Al-Qaeda's ideological assault on Hamas flared up again when the latter formed a government; it escalated further in February 2007, when the Saudi king sponsored an agreement between Hamas and its rival Fatah in Mecca. When Hamas ousted Fatah from the Gaza strip in June 2007, al-Qaeda rejoiced over the expulsion of what it deemed "apostates," and then demanded that Hamas proclaim an "Islamic emirate" to rule over the area. In spite of this, the intra-Islamist conflict between al-Qaeda and Hamas only continued to deteriorate.

Target: Gaza

AFTER OUSTING FATAH, HAMAS SWIFTLY MOVED AGAINST THE ARMED GROUPS that had spread throughout the Gaza strip during previous years. Hamas's goals in seeking to purge Gaza of militant groups other than itself and to consolidate its power over the strip were multi-fold: to wipe-out all remaining pockets of Fatah supporters and to deter the threat of a Ramallah-inspired military roll-back; to restore law and order, which was one of the main concerns of the local population; to stop the kidnapping of foreign nationals (24 foreigners, including 16 Westerners, had been abducted in Gaza from 2004 to 2006); and to attempt to boost its international image.

Hamas moved quickly in particular against a shadowy group known as the "Army of Islam" (*Jaysh al-Islâm*), which had been embedded in the powerful Dughmush clan, one of the most heavily armed factions in the Gaza strip. The Army of Islam had abducted a BBC correspondent in Gaza and subsequently demanded the release of two al-Qaeda-linked detainees—a failed Iraqi suicide-bomber imprisoned in Jordan, and the charismatic cleric Abu Qutada, who was jailed in the UK. While the Army of Islam indulged in inflammatory rhetoric against Hamas that echoed al-Qaeda's own polemic, Hamas attacked the group. It first secured the British hostage's release, then dismantled the Army of Islam, and finally crushed the defiant Dughmush stronghold.

Armed to the teeth, Hamas took the same repressive steps against all the other jihadi factions operating within its territory, including the "Army of the Muslim Nation" (*Jaysh al-umma*) and the "Soldiers of the Companions of God" (*Jund Ansar Allah*). Radical mosques were raided and al-Qaeda-inspired militants were rounded up. Even Afghan attire, which is typically worn by salafi fighters, was banned by Hamas. The only faction that was tolerated by Hamas was its long-term anti-Israel ally Islamic Jihad. But while Islamic Jihad's militants were sent to the frontlines to join Hamas's fighters against Israel, Hamas banned them from patrolling the streets of Gaza.

Hamas's liquidation of al-Qaeda-linked and inspired groups in Gaza scandalized the leadership of the global jihadist movement. In December 2007, bin Laden himself accused Hamas of "neglecting its religion" and "recognizing international treaties" with non-Islamic entities, while Zawahiri excoriated Hamas for having "surrendered four-fifths of Palestine." In February 2008, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq and its self-proclaimed caliph, called for Hamas's militant wing to declare that it would sever ties with the movement's "deviant and corrupt political leadership." This call for an internal coup inside the Islamist movement had the effect of spurring Hamas's leadership to tighten its grip on Gaza strip and to clamp down on other Islamist factions.

Al-Qaeda's hostility toward Hamas ultimately backlashed when, during the fall of 2007, Said Imam al-Sharif—better known as "Dr. Fadl," one of the founding members of al-Qaeda—turned against bin Laden and Zawahiri. This public repudiation struck a devastating blow to al-Qaeda's prestige in jihadi circles—a blow that Zawahiri later hoped to deflect in an online chat session that he hosted with militants. In the course of these exchanges, most of al-Qaeda's critics expressed disapproval either with al-Qaeda's massacres of fellow Muslims in countries like Iraq or with al-Qaeda's vocal condemnations of Hamas.[1]

After this episode, al-Qaeda's leaders toned down their attacks against Hamas and focused more on what they described as the Islamic duty to wage war against Israel and to lift the "siege of Gaza." In doing so, they accused Hosni Mubarak's government in Egypt of collaborating with Israel in enforcing the siege, called upon the Egyptian "masses" to rebel against their rulers, and then criticized the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood for accepting the *status quo*.

Al-Qaeda's globalization of the Islamist propaganda surrounding Gaza effectively allowed it to benefit from the conflict without directly confronting Hamas. This continued throughout Israel's Cast Lead offensive in Gaza, which was launched in the last days of 2008. In January 2009, bin Laden called for a worldwide campaign of terror against the USA and Israel, while reiterating his pledge once again to topple what he dubbed as apostate Arab regimes. In this, Gaza appeared to be no more than one piece on the ambitious chessboard of al-Qaeda's global jihad.

Without a doubt, al-Qaeda was disappointed that Hamas's leadership and militia did not suffer greater losses during the Israeli offensive. As long as Hamas's control over Gaza remains, al-Qaeda has little opportunity of developing its own networks in that closely-knit territory. As of now, it is only in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon that Palestinian nationalism has partially dissolved and been replaced by salafist "globalism."[2] The fact that Hamas always refused to develop a military presence in Lebanon and in its refugee camps, even after the decline of the PLO as well as pro-Syrian factions, has left a security vacuum especially around the cities of Saida and Tripoli that salafi-jihadi groups have managed to penetrate.

In the winter of 2006-2007, the northern Lebanon camp of Nahr al-Bared became a laboratory where veterans of the jihad in Iraq, al-Qaeda-inspired Islamist preachers, and "post-national" militants converged in the creation of the movement known as "Fatah al-Islam." This new movement lost its Nahr al-Bared stronghold in September 2007, after months of fighting with the Lebanese army, but retains strong links with al-Qaeda through its Iraqi branch. However, Fatah al-Islam's dubious record pales in light of Hamas's prestige within the wider Palestinian arena. Unless an unforeseen catastrophe transforms Gaza into a new Nahr al-Bared, it is difficult to see how al-Qaeda will be able to contest Hamas's grip on its own turf.

From the Muslim Brotherhood's perspective, Hamas has succeeded in reviving the political atmosphere of the 1940s, when jihad in Palestine secured the loyalties and desires of Islamist militants throughout the region. As a practical matter, Hamas's emphasis on the national struggle against Israel as a way of unifying its constituency and establishing its rule means postponing—and even confronting—any other Islamist project that might potentially prove ideologically and organizationally divisive. This includes global jihadist movements such as al-Qaeda and their ideologies. Hamas has even attempted to transcend religious sectarian lines by accepting support from Hezbollah and from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the same spirit, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is the only Sunni Islamist party whose leaders have refrained from attacking what Islamists throughout the region describe as an Iranian-led "Shia plot" to dominate the Arabs and convert them to Shiism.

The Muslim Brotherhood movement, and especially Hamas, has achieved significant political gains and established a considerably broad political base by championing itself as the leader of a nationalist version of jihad, with deep roots in a people and a territory. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's ideology of "global jihad" seems more and more irrelevant and out of touch with Muslim reality and the very Muslim populations it seeks to mobilize. The gamble of rejecting Islamic sectarianism is fascinating for an organization like the Muslim Brotherhood, which is historically associated with the most militant forms of Sunnism—for instance, in Syria. This could prove to be another blow the Brotherhood and Hamas have struck at al-Qaeda—a blow that

has only worsened the global jihadist movement's current crisis. For the time being, the extreme violence with which Hamas forces crushed the salafist group known as "Soldiers of the Companions of God" in August 2009 leaves virtually no doubt that any al-Qaeda-affiliated or even inspired militancy will have few prospects in the Hamas-controlled Gaza strip.[3]

NOTES

1. The whole exchange was released on-line by Al-Sahab, the AQ-linked media company, on April 2, 2008. An English transcript is available at http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefazawahiri0408.pdf.
2. The landmark study of the dissolution of Palestinian national identity in the global Islamic identity in the refugee camps in Lebanon is Bernard Rougier's *Everyday jihad*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008).
3. 24 members of the *Jund Ansar Allah*, including their spiritual and military leaders, were killed when Hamas security stormed the Ibn Taimiyya mosque in Rafah, on August 15, 2009.